

A Qualitative Action Research on English Speaking Course at Tertiary Level

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Abstract:

The world is being globalized day by day and the need for knowing English is becoming higher. However, knowing is not only having the knowledge of grammatical and lexical parts of English, it is also about having a good level of speaking skills, as it is the core of communication around the globe. Speaking skills might be regarded as one of the most difficult skills in English, and the studies mostly focused on the problems behind not being able to enhance it effectively and finding solutions to enhance it. The present action research, similarly, tries to find a new way of speaking activity in order to enhance English preparatory class students' speaking skills. Unlike previous studies, a novel way of peer-to-peer speaking activity has been applied and the findings showed the effectiveness of the action in a short span of time.

Keywords: speaking skill, peer-to-peer activity, action research, speaking anxiety

I. Introduction

Globalization has led to many revolutions in every part of life, including the economies, and education systems of countries. In globalized and modernized countries, each individual is required to be equipped with some basic skills, and speaking English is now regarded as one of these basic skills (Graddol, 2007, pp. 70-72). Furthermore, speaking is among the most distinguished skills as the core of communication lies in speaking skills (Littlewood, 1992).

The grade of onset for English language learning in Turkey has been the second grade as of 2012-2013 (MoNE, 2017), and the students have been exposed to a considerable number of hours in English till university; however, they feel uncomfortable while speaking English as they have been mostly focused on written skills rather than speaking skills due to examination (Manigandan, Kumar, Devi, 2017). Speaking skill is among the hardest skills to be developed by learners (Gan, 2013) for several reasons, such as anxiety (Horwitz, 2008), the lack of practice time for speaking (Pitura, 2021), willingness to communicate (Uztosun, 2020), or fear of being judged and laughed at by others (Afifah, Thamrin & Darsih, 2020).

So far, the studies investigated the speaking problems of English learners and tried to illuminate ways of enhancing the speaking skill of foreign language learners (Chand, 2021; Jaya, Petrus & Pitaloka, 2022; Zainnurrahman & Sangaji, 2019). In line with this, choosing and applying appropriate speaking practice activities is suggested as an effective way for it (Afifah, Thamrin & Darsih, 2020). A study carried out by Shahini and Shahamirian (2021) showed that speaking English in class is an effective way of developing speaking fluency since the help of teachers and peers enables students to enhance their speaking skills.

When all these aspects are taken into consideration, it is an inevitable result that new steps should be taken to develop speaking skills and to make students more willing to speak. Concerning this situation, the present qualitative action research aims to find a better and a suitable way of developing the speaking skills of tertiary-level English language learners by administering an action plan and evaluating its results to build a new implementation plan for the future. It is believed that the present action research will take a step further in terms of administering new approaches to the English-speaking skills of young adults. With the help of the findings of this action research, a new way of speaking activity for young adults might be developed and applied wisely.

In particular, this qualitative action research will examine three main research questions:

1. What are the opinions of preparatory class students about a session conducted by a student who has graduated from preparatory?
2. How does a student who has graduated from preparatory class enhance preparatory class students' English-speaking interest and motivation?
3. Is it effective for the English speaking interest and motivation of preparatory class students to have a session with a student who has graduated from preparatory class?

II. Method

a. Research Design:

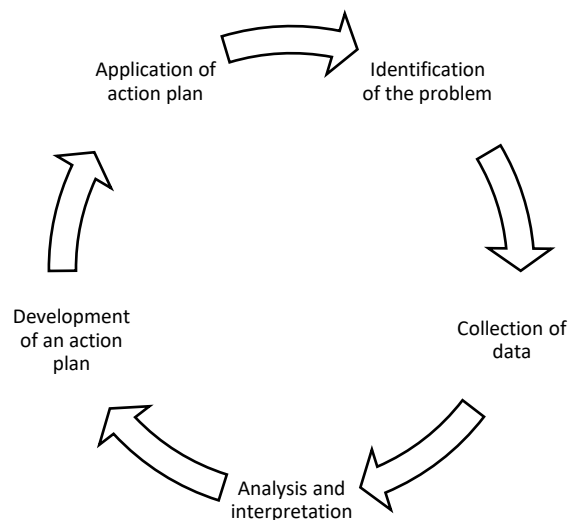
Action research is a type of research design used to gather information about a specific classroom setting, teaching, or learning procedure by a classroom teacher (Cresswell, 2012). It has a significant role for educators to reflect on their classroom practices, so they had a chance to improve their teaching or learning of students (Cresswell, 2012). Practical action research, which aims to investigate a particular classroom situation to improve practice, is applied in the present study. Mills (2011) proposes a process of action research: identification of a problem, collection of data, analysis and interpretation of the collected data, and development of an action plan (see Figure 1). The present study follows this process; as the identification of the problem; within time, the motivation levels, and interests of students in speaking sessions are decreasing for some reasons such as online platforms, connection problems, etc. There has been a need for a constructive plan to enhance their motivation and interest in the lessons. Based on this problem, a sophomore in university, but a freshman in the department (studied preparatory class last year, now studies in the department) conducted a speaking lesson with the students enrolled in a preparatory class. Two sessions were done, and they lasted 80 minutes in total (40-40). The topics of the sessions were determined by the sophomore, including the topics of phobias, hobbies, etc. They only spoke in English; Turkish was never allowed. The sessions were recorded by the online system, and the researcher observed the students later. In the data collection process, after these speaking sessions, an online open-ended question form was sent to the students, and they were asked to fill in the form with their sincere answers. Content analysis followed to analyze the data. Based on the obtained findings, a plan to be followed the next years has been determined. On a regular basis, there will be sophomores, juniors, or seniors who will carry out speaking lessons on various subjects in order to motivate learners and increase their interest in and awareness of language learning.

Figure 1. Steps of action plan in the present study

b. Research Setting and Participants:

The present study was carried out at the preparatory unit of a public university in Türkiye. The study was conducted in the “Listening & Speaking” course near the end of the spring term of the 2021-2022 academic year. The allocated time for the course in a week was six hours, and two of these hours were allocated only for the speaking skill. There were 132 students enrolled in the preparatory class. The age range of the students was 18-24 and their English level is B1 (CEFR). For the present action research date, 98 of them were in the session. At the end of the session, all the students were sent an online form about the session, and 56 of them completed it comprehensively.

c. Data Collection and Analysis:



At the end of the session, students were sent to an online form, which consists of 12 open-ended questions related to the session. The questions included the ideas and feelings about, comments on, and suggestions for the speaking session conducted by a sophomore. 56 forms were obtained in total, and all answers were analyzed by following a deductive thematic analysis, which involves some key predetermined terms (i.e. ideas, feelings, etc.).

d. Speaking Session with the Words of the sophomore

Thoughts before class:

“In fact, before the lesson; it’s pretty simple; somehow I thought I’d focus on two issues and direct the flow of the conversation. To my friends who asked me if I was excited, I said no, because I thought lecturing was like speaking in public.”

In-class experience and course flow:

“Certainly experience perfects talent. In the last class I entered, I was many times better than in the first class I entered. Of course, I applied the following in every class; everyone should talk. Students were asked individual questions about themselves. A chat flow was created for the answers they gave. A motivational speech was given to relieve the students' concerns about English and English learning. Students were given resources that they could engage with easily. Body language, gestures, and mimics were avoided during speaking. The students were asked questions that they could easily answer. Five minutes were given for each question. Students who could not use microphones due to online education responded via chat box. When students made reading errors, corrections were made by themselves. In order to encourage, the conversations were narrated through students' hobbies or favorite TV series/movies. Due to time constraints, answers were received from volunteer students at the last minute. Finally, I gave advice and said that I can help with anything. I said you can reach me 24/7. During the session, I used conversation practice, self-correction, and storytelling techniques mostly.”

End-of-course comments:

“At the end of each lesson, I thought, I wish there was more time so we could talk more because time is short and advice is so much. I should point out that there were some people in Class X who were face-to-face and dropped out after the first lesson. I thought either they have excellent English or I thought it was my fault. I have already seen the first lesson that there is no first part. I realized that there was a problem there, but I did not understand the problem, frankly, I had to question myself. That's why I listened to the podcasts of foreign trainers even on the train.”

III. Findings and Discussion

Based on the obtained qualitative data, at first, the feelings and ideas of the students before the speaking session conducted by a sophomore were identified. Before the session, the students were not informed that their next speaking session would be carried out by a peer

student; they only knew that the usual lecturer would not be there. Therefore, most of the students were curious and excited before the session as they claimed to have no information about the next session. A few of them reported the feeling of uneasiness due to the fact that they would speak with someone else they did not know. Except these feelings, they also had some positive ideas on possibly having an enjoyable session, while some of them thought it would be a session as usual. Almost half of them reported they did not have any idea about the session, so they felt neutral. Table 1 shows some of the excerpts of students about their feelings and ideas before the session.

Table 1
Feelings and ideas before the session

Feelings	Curiosity	I was curious before the session about what it would be like.
	Excitement	The idea of carrying out a kind of different session made me excited.
	Uneasiness	In fact, I felt uneasy about the session because we were about to speak with someone else and I didn't have any idea about what to speak.
Ideas	Enjoyable session	I was thinking of it would be an enjoyable session.
	No idea	I didn't think anything about the session.
	Usual session	I thought that we would have a session as usual.

The students reported their feelings and ideas just after the session conducted by the sophomore, and the findings were satisfactory as the majority of them though the session was effective, and it increased their motivation to learn and develop English skills. Motivation is one of the most influential factors in language learning process (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). A few students reported that the session was ineffective, and they were disappointed because they believed the students were not capable of conducting a session, so they would rather have a session with a lecturer. This result showed that teaching is a different skill and just like novice teachers, the ones who are not experienced might have some difficulties such as classroom management, establishing good rapport, applying appropriate pedagogy, etc. (Septiani, Emiliasari, & Rofi'i, 2019). The ones who thought it was an effective session wished to have more sessions like that. Table 2 demonstrates the feelings and ideas of the students with some excerpts after the session.

Table 2

Feelings and ideas after the session

Feelings	Motivation	-I felt motivated that I need to study harder.
		-Yes, I don't have perfect English-speaking skills, but after this session I understood that I know enough English to explain myself, so I was motivated and happy.
		-I was motivated that I need to learn more vocabulary and improve my speaking skills as my current level seems inadequate.
		-I wanted to chat in English constantly.
Ideas	Disappointment	-I think it was helpful for him to tell us about his experiences and make suggestions, it helps us motivate ourselves to get better at English.
		It could be better. It was worse than I expected, and I understood that a student cannot carry out a lesson.
		-I was a different experience for us but I didn't feel anything.
		Nothing
Ideas	Effectiveness	It was effective and I wish we had more sessions like this.
	Ineffectiveness	I thought it was not so effective for us due to the inability of a student managing a lesson.

In order to answer the research questions, general feelings and comments of the students on the session were identified. The majority of the students thought that the session was interesting and a different experience for them. They had a chance to interact more, and they felt more motivated to learn, practice, and develop their English-speaking skills. According to Allwright (1984), interaction plays a supporting role in enhancing language skills, particularly in speaking skill. On the other hand, they got to the point that being aware of an idea despite insufficient knowledge of English can be enough to communicate. Some of them wished to participate in the sessions to be held next year as a sophomore to carry out a similar session. They felt more relaxed and comfortable while speaking English as there was no pressure from teachers, the topics were not strict, and they were not learning anything new.

The more the students are relaxed, the less speaking anxiety they will have (Young, 1990), so they might have a chance to enhance their speaking skill. A student summarized his feelings as follows:

“I think English is something we can do when we believe we can speak it. I think this is the case with many things, so first we must believe in ourselves and what we can do. Practicing speaking with our peers can be both fun and educational for us. Another thing I realized after the lesson is that we don’t have to speak perfectly and at an advanced level, we just need to be able to express our thoughts in a simple but understandable way. Of course, when we think about the academic dimension, I see ourselves at the very beginning of the road. But progress is also in our hands, and we can improve ourselves by putting theory into practice.”

Apart from these positive comments, there were some negative ones as well. They felt bored during the session, and some of them felt a little bit hesitant and worried about being corrected by a peer. Table 3 shows the general feelings and comments of the students on the session with excerpts.

According to Brown (2007), students might feel demotivated and not willing to communicate due to their teachers’ negative comments on their performance, and the present findings showed that no matter whom the operator of the course is, the students can feel worried about being negatively evaluated on their speaking performance.

Table 3

General feelings and comments on the session

Comments	Negative	Hesitation	It was a lesson where I exhibited the knowledge I had learned before, I mean we didn’t learn new things. In this lesson, I was afraid and hesitated if I said something wrong, would the instructor correct me or what if I said something wrong. I had these kinds of feelings and thoughts.
		Ineffectiveness	It was the most ineffective session for me.
		Unease	I was uneasy during the session.
	Positive	Awareness raising	-I think the difference of this session from other session is that it has created the awareness that

		we can easily speak English with other people.
		-Speaking English with someone who is also a learner and a peer for me made me aware of that I can do the same thing, I can also speak English.
		-It was so easeful, so I didn't force myself to learn something new.
		-I realized that I spoke more comfortably in this session.
Ease		-It was like a daily speech practice, as it was more like a conversation rather than a lecture. For us, it was an interesting, fun, and comfortable experience to carry out a session with our friend in the senior year.
Feelings	Boredom	The course was not flowing, and no one was interested in the course due to age proximity. So, it was boring.
	Wellness	-We were in more interaction. It was fun.
		-It was very nice, efficient, and friendly.

IV. Conclusion

The aim of the present action research is to see the influences of a session conducted by a sophomore who graduated from preparatory class last year on the preparatory class students' English speaking courses. The data was collected by an open-ended interview questionnaire, and the findings were analyzed by a deductive thematic analysis. The results showed that, in general, most of English preparatory class students enjoyed having a speaking session with a student, who was a previous preparatory student, in the department as they felt more relaxed, more motivated, and more interested in speaking English, while a few of them thought vice versa. On the other hand, when the words of the sophomore were examined, it is clearly seen that he also improved and questioned himself. The action research plan did not only affect learners but also the sophomore student who took advantage of a teaching experience. According to Graves (2000), the teaching and learning process should be designed according to the needs and learning styles of the students so that students might be more engaged in lessons (Alharbi, 2015). Hence, further classes and activities might be designed based on the results of the present study by the virtue of Graves' (2000) notions. Besides, it might be a

good idea to take into account (for the future classes) how the course is flowed from the student's (sophomore) perspective, what is focused on and which techniques (storytelling, self-correction, etc.) are used. Nevertheless, there are lots of variables that should be taken into consideration while conducting a session like this, of course, such as the pedagogical aspects of teaching session, or the English level of conductor student, etc. For the future research, the student to conduct the session would be chosen more wisely, the number of the participants would be increased, and allocated time and the number of sessions like this would be increased to see the real effects of the actions.

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Biodata:

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